

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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A Painter Finds Depth in Flatness

by Susan Silas on August 28, 2014



Carl Ostendarp, "Charles Kynard" (2014) (all images courtesy the artist and Elizabeth Dee, New York, unless otherwise noted)

"The world is flat." So declared New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman in 2005. And before the world was flat, it was round, and before that it was flat. And the picture plane was flat too. It gained the illusion of depth with the development of linear perspective, which, coincidentally or not, transpired roughly around the same time as the confirmation that the world is indeed round, proved by the explorations of Ferdinand Magellan.

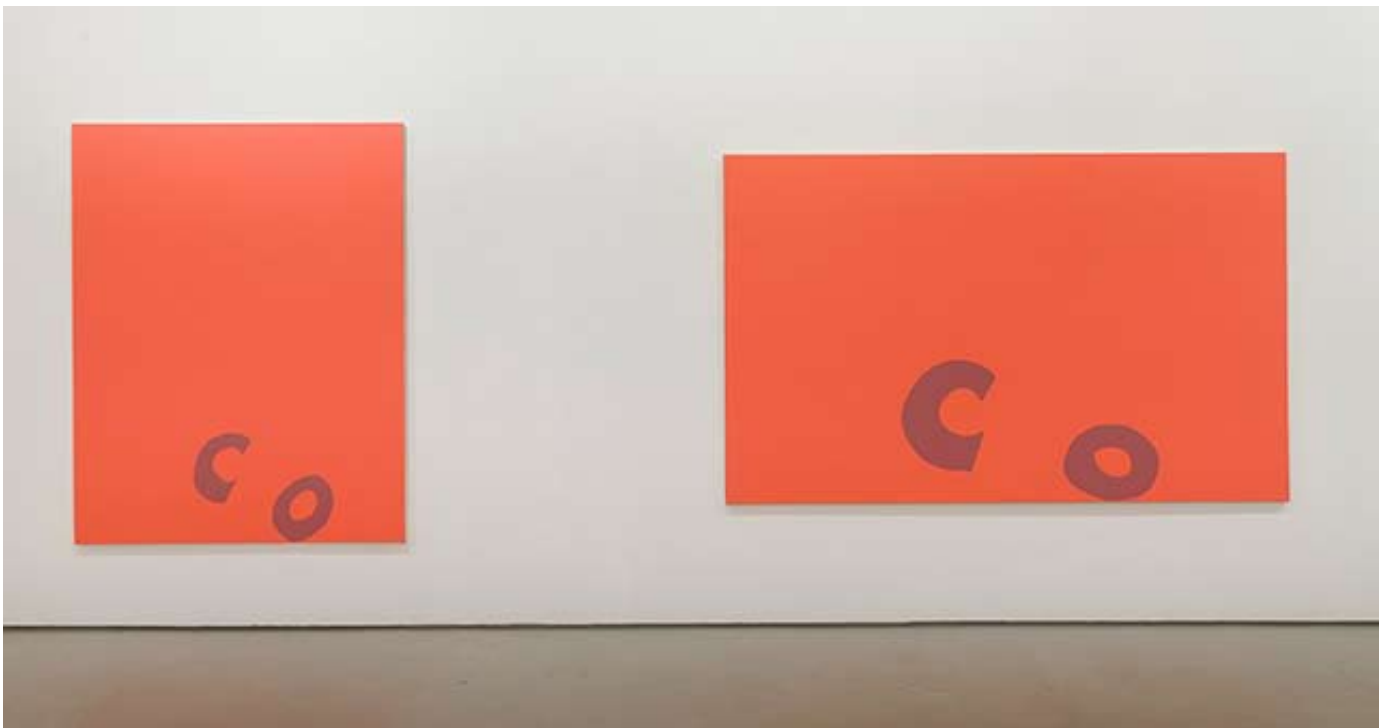
The painter David Simons recently remarked to me that he saw a parallel between pre-perspectival painting (the world as flat) and comic books. That gave me pause, because I was raised on Superman and Spiderman comics, Archie and Veronica, and later, R. Crumb. I loved those comics, and I have always loved the period of painting before perspective really took hold, mostly iconic religious pictures of the 12th and 13th centuries. What these two rather disparate practices have in common is that both rely on a clear distillation of ideas down to an essence that can reach any audience — one in which the story line and the characters are made perfectly clear.

This was an important method of conveying the religious narrative to a largely illiterate audience in the Middle Ages, in much the same way as it was important to the first animated cartoons in silent film.



(via Carl Ostendarp's Facebook page)

If you look at artist Carl Ostendarp's Facebook page, it is a parade of cartoon characters from various periods. In a video from the series *13 Artists in the Studio*, a 20-years-younger Ostendarp speaks of his admiration for painters whose work does not demand connoisseurship of the audience. He sees cartooning as based on this principle, and he believes there has always been cross-fertilization between high and low culture. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, much of art history was seen through the lens of connoisseurship, a certain kind of privileged knowing; when I was younger, courses were offered in "art appreciation" as an avenue of edification. What Ostendarp believes in is the possibility of being a serious painter in a world where everyone in the audience is an entitled viewer.



Installation view, 'Carl Ostendarp: BLANKS' at Elizabeth Dee gallery

Walking into Elizabeth Dee gallery, where Ostendarp currently has a show on view, my first thought is to decipher the meaning of the two letters, a C and an O, floating toward the bottom edge of a field of color in each and every painting in the room. For a moment I think company, but there is no period. Then care of, but there is no forward slash. Then I step further into the gallery and a blue painting, half hidden in the office, catches my eye. "CARL," it says. Of course, how long was it going to take me? Carl Ostendarp.



Carl Ostendarp, "Untitled" (1992), urethane foam on linen (click to enlarge)

Although always interested in surface, Carl Ostendarp seemed, early in his career, more interested in topography — a funny mix of the world as flat and the world as round. For topography brings to mind the surface of the earth and thus its spherical character, yet that same attention to surface is a serious painterly concern and one executed on the flat surface of the canvas. Ostendarp built up his surfaces, sometimes with foam, confusing some into thinking that he was a sculptor. In the same YouTube video mentioned above, Ostendarp says: “All the paintings that I admired, like the Pollock paintings, the Newman paintings — the thing that was most impressive to me was their sense of physicality.”

The focus on physicality that emerged in his early work is clear in the current exhibition, titled BLANKS. It's evident in the scale of each painting and the arrangement of the works on the wall, and in the relationship of one painting to the next. It's clear, walking around the gallery rooms, that the scale and placement of each work is not accidental but carefully thought through. The show is both a collection of paintings and a calculated installation that takes everything in the gallery environment into account.



Installation view, 'Carl Ostendarp: BLANKS' at Elizabeth Dee gallery

At Pace Gallery in London earlier this year, Ostendarp created a mural upon which other artworks were hung, including one of his own. The palette of the mural was a kindred spirit to that of the paintings in the first room at Elizabeth Dee. At Pace the mural became a parietal layer, like the lining of the inside of a body cavity. (I must confess that I saw this show in reproductions only.) Even the ceiling was aglow with reflective color. It was a room, but it's easy to anthropomorphize. *Fantastic Voyage* springs to mind, that sci-fi thriller, or was it comedy, produced in 1966, in which a miniature submarine is launched into the body of a Russian scientist, maneuvering its way through syrupy viscera and abstracted organs.



Installation view, 'Everything falls faster than an anvil' at Pace London, with Ostendarp's all-over mural (courtesy the artist and Pace London)

The history of painting is in part a history of engagement with the human form. In the installation at Pace Gallery, the body was there by inference. The mural functioned not just as another artwork or as a ground; it suggested an interior cavity on the one hand, and on the other created self-awareness of the body through the experience of all-enveloping color. Everything is alive or reborn to our attention because the color heightens viewers' self-consciousness at the moment when they come into contact with the artworks on the wall.



Ostendarp's mural at Pace London (courtesy the artist and Pace London) (click to enlarge)

The achievement of Ostendarp's mural was to contextualize each artwork as newly present. It is always difficult to imagine the surprise or astonishment at a new work when we already know it, know how it has entered the art historical context. The mural sought to regift us with that experience of newness. This, it seems to me, is both an act of generosity toward other artists and one of deep respect for the endeavor of art making. It raises some prickly questions, too: Did the other artists consent to having their images shown this way, surrounded by a pink glowing halo of color? What was the relationship of the mural as painting to the paintings hanging on top of it?

In the show at Elizabeth Dee, we are presented with paintings that are fields of color. A salmony pink in the first room, a glorious yellow and a saturated orange in the second. And on these fields of color are our two playful icons, two letters or characters, subject to a strange gravity, rolling downhill, levitating themselves, bouncing up and down like the ball in a sing-along. We can anthropomorphize these letters as easily as we can anything else. They are signs, and they are part of the alphabet. The press release asserts that they are "effectively 'ruining' the monochrome field." I don't think "ruin" is the word I would choose. The letters seem more like a way to playfully cajole us into a reevaluation of the monochrome field.



Installation view, 'Carl Ostendarp: BLANKS' at Elizabeth Dee gallery

Ostendarp has a special interest in the history of American painting from 1965 to 1975. But 1965 was not just the starting point for artistic strategies that included performance and expanded the range of interdisciplinary practices; it was also the inauguration of “The Great Society,” it saw the firebombing of the home of Malcolm X, it was the year when anti-Vietnam War protesters began to be arrested in the streets. It was a time of fundamental redefinition. And the juxtaposition of the historical paired with a keen interest in the experience of the present, either in the act of creating a ground for other artworks or in the act of disrupting the monochrome field, seems to be a strategy of redefinition.

Or perhaps Ostendarp’s initials are simply an advertisement for him — a personal ad for an artist seeking egalitarian souls.

Carl Ostendarp: BLANKS continues at Elizabeth Dee (545 W 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through September 6.